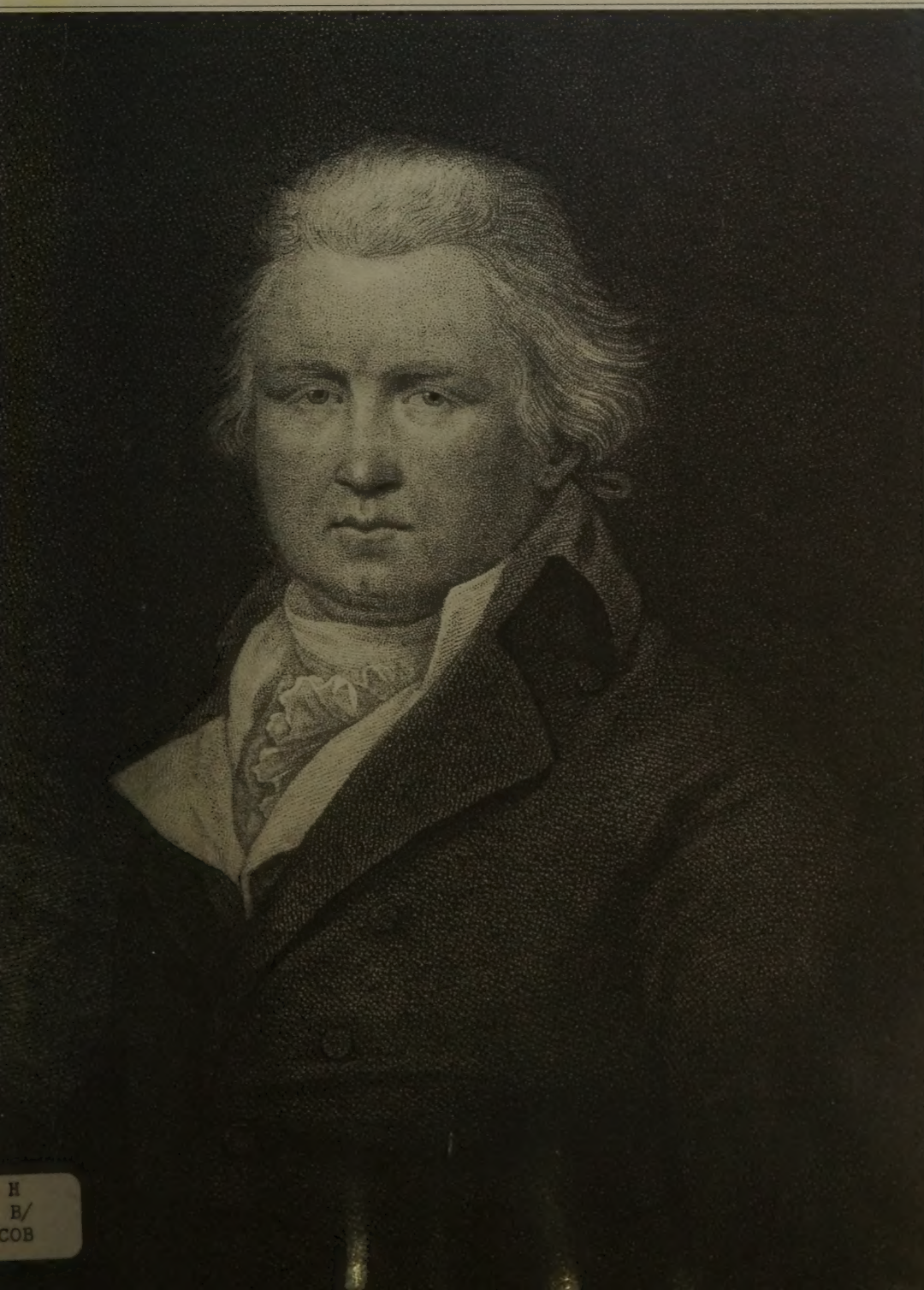


The Jolly Farmer?
William Cobbett in Hampshire, 1804-1820

Barbara Biddell

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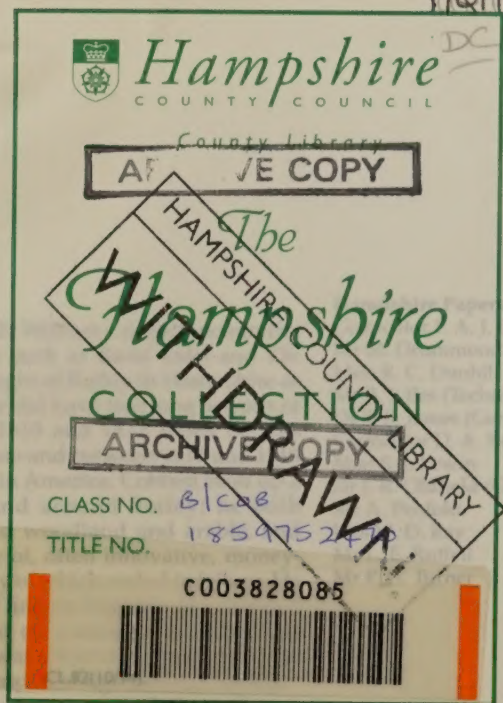
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Abstract

Between 1805 and 1817, William Cobbett, author of *The English Gardener*, lived at his home, although his absence – between 1805 and 1817 – was due to his imprisonment in Newgate while he was in possession of a considerable estate in Hampshire. He purchased and let land, and embarked on a range of land-making schemes in which he also involved himself. He was also involved in the rebuilding of Botley church, served on the Waltham vestry and was a member of the Botley and South Lambrook Vestry.

This Paper is an account of the life of William Cobbett in Botley. Using Cobbett's own writings, it describes how he built up his estate and used his land and discusses his particular interest in gardening and tree-planting, showing how he imported a number of species from America. It examines his relationship with his labourers and his introduction of new farming methods and machinery, and the contrast between his actions and some of the opinions expressed in *Rural Rides*. It also considers his impact on the local community – his role on Bishops Waltham vestry, his support for enclosure and the part he played in the construction of a turnpike road.



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Front cover

Engraving of William Cobbett by Bartolozzi from a painting by John Raphael Smith, 1801.
Farnham Museum.

Back cover

Detail from engraving entitled 'View of Mr Cobbett's House, Botley, Hants', 1817.
Hampshire Record Office, Top37/2/2.

The Jolly Farmer?

William Cobbett in Hampshire, 1804-1820

Barbara Biddell

INTRODUCTION

Today, William Cobbett is chiefly remembered for *Rural Rides*, his account of his travels through England, published first in the *Political Register*, then later as a book in 1830. An abrasive and forthright journalist who believed that poverty was caused by bad government and the corruption of the ruling classes, Cobbett was also an early 'Self-Help Smiles', keen to assist those who like himself had had to glean their schooling where they could. In publications like *A Grammar of the English Language* (1818), intended 'especially for the use of soldiers, sailors, apprentices and plough-boys', *Cottage Economy* (1822) and *Advice to Young Men and (Incidentally) to Young Women in the Middle and Higher Ranks of Life* (1830) he presented himself as a friend of the 'common man'. However, as his years in Hampshire reveal, Cobbett also had aspirations to become a successful farmer and landowner. It is this 'other side' of Cobbett which forms the subject of what follows.

Born in 1763, Cobbett was the third of four brothers who were all brought up to a hard agricultural life. When 'hardly able to climb the gates and stiles', he was put to work on his father's farm in Farnham, Surrey, 'driving the small birds from the turnip-seed and the rooks from the peas' (fig. 1). He then graduated to 'weeding wheat, and leading a single horse at harrowing barley', and (finally) was allowed to join the reapers at harvest, 'driving the team and holding [the] plough'. (*Porcupine's Works*, iv, 34.) Cobbett's pleasure in his birthright and his descriptions of the countryside embellish all his writings. But, if truth be told, he hated the grinding drudgery of farm work and his reputation in the family was 'to shirk steady work. When set to mind the pigs at graise or in the stubble, he would . . . stray away after some business that better suited his taste.' (Nuff. XIV.)

Fig. 1. Print of the Jolly Farmer, the house at Farnham in which William Cobbett was born, from Robert Huish's *Memoirs of the Late William Cobbett Esq* (1836). Farnham Museum.



At 14 Cobbett ran away to Kew. Later, on a visit to an uncle in Portsmouth, he tried to join the Navy but was turned away. He ran away again in 1783, this time to London, and, after a dismal year as a lawyer's clerk, volunteered as a soldier and joined the 54th Regiment of Foot, then serving in Nova Scotia. Soon after his arrival in Canada he was made clerk to the regiment and quickly rose to the rank of sergeant major. It was in Canada that Cobbett met his future wife, Anne ('Nancy') Reid, the 13-year-old daughter of a sergeant of artillery. When Nancy's father's regiment returned to England, Cobbett entrusted her with his savings of 150 guineas. These she kept intact and gave back to him when the couple were reunited in November 1791. Having obtained his discharge, William and Nancy were married at Woolwich on 5 February 1792.

Cobbett's experiences as a soldier sharpened his distrust of the army system, so much so that he determined to take action against his superiors for withholding benefits from non-commissioned ranks (Spater 1982, i, 30). However, military opposition to the case forced the Cobbetts to sail for France and thence to the United States. They landed in America in October 1792 and after fourteen months in Wilmington, moved to Philadelphia where Cobbett taught English, opened a bookshop and began his literary career. He wrote pamphlets under the sobriquet 'Peter Porcupine' in support of George III and the British government, he gained the friendship of the British embassy staff and his writings also won him a reputation in England.

When two libel actions forced Cobbett to leave America in 1800, he returned to England a hero and was welcomed by government ministers, among them William Windham, then a member of Pitt's Cabinet and Secretary at War (Cole 1924, 70). Windham obviously recognised the value of Cobbett's satirical journalism and helped to provide the capital for the *Political Register* which Cobbett began in 1802 and published for the rest of his life. Late in 1803 he started Cobbett's *Parliamentary Debates* which were edited by John Wright, who was invaluable to Cobbett as editorial assistant of the *Political Register* (Spater 1982, i, 170).

By 1804 Cobbett had achieved his main ambition, namely to run a successful weekly newspaper, and now felt secure enough to pursue his other objective, to live in the country and own land. That year Lord Henry Stuart, whom Cobbett had met in Canada, invited Cobbett and his family to stay at The Grange, near Alresford. The party visited Winchester, Lyndhurst in the New Forest, Southampton, Wickham and finally Botley, where they took lodgings with Richard Smith and went to church. Cobbett had already determined to give his family a country upbringing. (He and Nancy now had four



Fig. 2 (facing). Extract from the 1st edition 1 inch Ordnance Survey map showing the area around Botley. Note the site of the original Botley church. The map was first published in 1810 but was updated in c. 1840 to show the newly built London and South Western and Gosport Junction railways. The Gosport Junction Railway, shown clearly here, passed through the farm lands of Botley Hill.

Hampshire Record Office, 50M71/1.



Fig. 3. Engraving entitled 'View of Mr Cobbett's House, Botley, Hants' published in 1817. The house was built by Robert Stares, a farmer and miller from Botley known locally as 'King Stares'. It was nicknamed 'lantern house' because of its many windows, and later 'St Paul's house' as it was thought to resemble a church rather than a house (*Hampshire Repository* ii, 1801, biog., 52). Cobbett described it as 'about fifty feet long, forty wide, three clear storeys high, with a high roof and high chimneys' (*Woodlands*, para. 350).

Hampshire Record Office, Top37/2/2.

children: Anne, aged nine; William, five; John Morgan, three; and James Paul, just one.) However, a scheme to spend the winter in London and the summer in Botley (BL Add. MS 22906, 1.12.1805) was soon abandoned – Cobbett hated the grime and smoke in London – and in 1805 he found the copyhold property, Botley House, set in grounds which ran down to the River Hamble. For the next 15 years he thought of Botley as his home (Nuff. XV, 21; fig. 2).

COBBETT'S ESTATE

In the *Political Register* Cobbett attacked land speculation, declaring that it had 'driven the real property of the nation into fewer hands... moulded many farms into one... [and] almost... extinguished the race of small farmers' whose houses were now occupied by labourers (PR 15.3.1806). But, in 1805, Cobbett arrived in Botley intent on investing in property. He had no reserves of capital and had just been forced to borrow money to pay off two libel actions. Botley House was his first acquisition. In August 1805 he wrote to Windham: 'I venture to call it mine and I trust it will be so next year' (BL Add. MS 37853, 12.8.1805; fig. 3). That October he also acquired Cock Street Farm, Droxford, to support his brother, Thomas, and his large family. These

transactions, however, exhausted Cobbett's credit and he had to renege on his tradesmen's bills (including his wine merchant). Then, at Christmas 1805, a white knight appeared in the shape of George Crosby. 'He has bid me draw on him', Cobbett wrote triumphantly to Wright in December. 'It will enable me to pay for carts, ploughs, seeds for the farm, cows, harness, my butcher, my brewer and every other thing in Hants.' (BL Add. MS 22906, 29.12.1805.)

In 1806 Cobbett went further and bought Fairthorn, a farm of 249 acres leased to John Mears, for £11,000 (Chun 1989, 12). By this time the *Political Register* was bringing in an income of £1,000 per annum, but out of this Cobbett had to fund his various literary enterprises, which now included *Cobbett's Spirit of the Public Journals* and *Cobbett's Parliamentary History of England*, as well as his land purchases. Realising this, Cobbett looked for well-wooded land where the timber would sooner or later cover the purchase price. In 1807 he bought a coppice on Curdridge Common for £120 and the following year acquired the 87-acre Hounsden estate, which was mostly woodland, for £3,150 (here he immediately felled 382 trees which brought him £2,670) (BL Add. MS 31126, 20.3.1808). Then, in 1808 he also bought the farms of Raglington (fig. 4) and Lockhams, 270 acres for £11,000, intending to

Fig. 4. Raglington Farm, Droxford. The farm was three miles from Botley House and had a 'good large farmhouse in which two of the best of the labourers lived' (Nuff. XVII). When Cobbett bought Raglington in 1808 he intended to plant all the land with various sorts of fruit trees. Then, in 1809, he kept the merino sheep he had imported from Spain there, and these were remembered by the family as a great expense and trouble.

Photograph: courtesy of David Chun.



use them for forestry. In all, between 1805 and 1808 Cobbett spent more than £27,000 on 643 acres; he financed these purchases by bills of exchange, assuring Wright 'I am going on here farming a fine estate . . . what I lay out is not spent . . . What is done now is worth 40 x as much as the same thing done some time hence.' (BL Add. MS 22907, 11.7.1808.)

Cobbett had felled mature trees on his land in 1808 and did so again in 1810. He reckoned to supply a London stickmaker with oak, ash, crab, thorn and whitethorn, and estimated this would bring him in £30 a year (BL Add. MS 22906, 25.3.1808). He also turned four Devonshire heifers into his coppices to enrich the soil, a practice which was frowned upon by Charles Vancouver, surveying Hampshire for the Board of Agriculture, because it trampled down young seedlings (Vancouver 1810, 296-7). In addition, Cobbett built his own woodyard because he hoped to deal in timber. His transport costs were low since Botley had wharves on the River Hamble and a thriving timber trade in hoops for the West Indies and wood for the Navy.

Cobbett's ideas on forestry were greatly influenced by Pontey's *Profitable Planter*, a book he ordered Wright to send him in July 1808. William Pontey, gardener to the Duke of Bedford, argued that otherwise unproductive land judiciously planted with trees could be abundantly productive. Cobbett agreed. He reckoned that an acre of ash coppice would bring £287 in profit after 10 years' growth and some return after five (*Woodlands*, para. 125). Over the long-term he considered forestry would be far more profitable than the wheat his neighbours were busy growing. Indeed, throughout his time at Botley, Cobbett planted trees continuously. In 1816 he sowed 'about a million ash trees' (Hammond 1921, 22) and had many more bushels in store. His trees, he said, would 'be fortunes for [his] children' (Nuff. XV, 23), but he obviously also hoped to make a decent income for himself from his coppices.

Fairthorn Farm, leased to Farmer Mears, Cobbett used for shooting and hare coursing, stocking it with game. Mr Garritt from Havant, Lord Clanricarde from Warnford and Lord Folkestone from Faringdon all gave him hares and Cobbett wrote blithely to Wright that 'the cost in the way that I shall manage the business will not be £5 a year' (BL Add. MS 31126, 11.6.1808). His daughter, Anne, however, remembered 'Great expense and trouble preserving game' (Nuff. XV, 25), although Cobbett did appoint gamekeepers and warned off poachers.

Cobbett was continually looking to extend and improve his estate. In 1810 he tried to buy five more farms, woodland, cottages, and a chalk pit in the next parish, Durley, but could not raise the capital (Nuff. XXX/25/1, WC-FR, 22.5.1810). In the meantime, he had altered Botley House, adding a grandiose portico, a stable adorned with a clock, a stable yard and wall. He possibly built a separate study in the garden for himself and four tied-cottages for his workmen: two were near Fairthorn on the road from Botley to Curbridge, one in Silford's coppice, and one probably at Botley House. He also closed up a footpath which ran through his land which he considered 'an injury to the estate of £500' (BL Add. MS 22906, 27.11.1807). Villagers now had an extra 100 yards to walk on a path that had formerly been part of the common waste land adjoining the highway.

From 1810 to 1812 Cobbett was imprisoned in Newgate for his condemnation of the flogging of mutinous conscripts at Ely. Yet he was still land hungry. No longer able to buy, he leased Botley Hill with 106 acres for £300 a year, and, when Farmer Mears's lease came up on Fairthorn, Cobbett did not renew it but took the farm in hand himself, grubbing out the coppices and changing the land use. Mears or his son Richard were to make the farmhouse or cottage available and Cobbett gradually moved in his own workforce (Nuff. XXIX, WC-JM, 1.10.1811).

Cobbett went on managing his estate from Newgate, sending down instructions daily. Three of his men – Dean, Robinson and Hurchett – came to Botley House each night and, since none of them could read or write, Cobbett's orders were read out (fig. 5). During this period Mrs Cobbett, Anne (15), William (11), John (9) and James (7) would ride around the estate seeing how the work progressed and, to their dismay, they found 'sheep constantly falling ill or dying or similar misfortunes amongst the cattle' (Nuff. XVII/1/3). Within six months the men were complaining that Cobbett expected a month's work to be completed in a week. Cobbett meanwhile complained that the men ignored his instructions. At length, he engaged a bailiff, William Woodward, but he proved incompetent and had to be dismissed (Nuff. XXIX, WC-FR, 1.1.1812).

Fig. 5. This sketch or 'plan' comes from a letter written in 1811 by William Cobbett junior, then aged 12, to his brother John, aged 10, while their father was imprisoned in Newgate. William and his mother were staying with Cobbett in Newgate (the family took it in turns to do so) and the sketch shows William's sister Anne (Nancy) reading one of Cobbett's letters of instruction to three of the workmen—Dean, Hurchett and Gullingham. While in Newgate Cobbett sent frequent letters detailing the work that was to be carried out on his farms.

Nuffield College, Oxford, Nuff. XXX, WC jun.-JMC, 1.2.1811.



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show by the face.

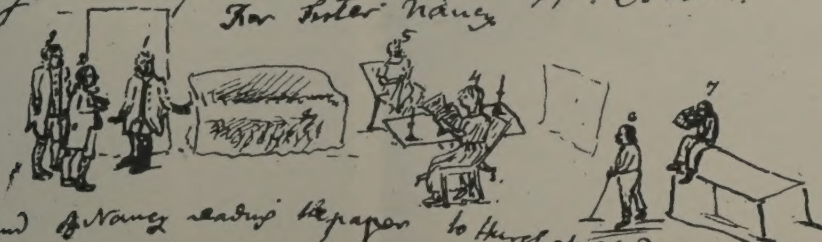
It is quite dark now and so I cannot write any more.

To Mr John Morgan Cobbett, God bless you.

Batley, Southhampton.

For Sister Nancy

W. Cobbett.



A plan of Nancy reading a paper to Hurchett & Dean & Gullingham
 1 Dean — 2 Hurchett — 3 Gullingham — 4 Nancy — 5 Hurchett
 6 Gullingham — 7 Johny etc.

In desperation Cobbett began to economise. Two barley threshers were laid off and instructions were given to take on no more outdoor men. Cobbett's brother-in-law, Lieutenant Frederick Reid, came to take charge of the estate but, owing to the shortage of money, feed for the animals (including the working horses) had to be rationed (Nuff. XXIX, FR-WC, 20.1.1812). This last economy so incensed Hays, one of the young ploughmen, that he became surly — surly enough for Cobbett to threaten him with prosecution. Reid reported to Cobbett that Hays had asked if Cobbett 'had suited [him]self with another plowman . . . he could not think of stopping and wished I would take him before a Magistrate.' (Nuff. XXIX, FR-WC, 20.1.1812.) By now the other men were also disgruntled and demanded extra money for threshing out wet corn. Indeed, the situation became so desperate that Cobbett almost sold up but Mrs Cobbett, fearing that any money made would be misinvested, persuaded her husband to keep the property.

When Cobbett left prison in 1812 he was heavily in debt and had paid a fine of £1,000. He had to borrow again to finance his farming and decided to recoup his losses by growing wheat. Unfortunately, however, he had missed the market. An abundant harvest in 1813 brought wheat prices down from 109 shillings a quarter to 74 shillings and in 1815 the war against France ended, so that home-grown wheat never again brought such premiums (Ernle 1936, 489). Cobbett realised that deflation had set in and

in 1817 admitted that he 'had lost during the last 3 or 4 years large sums annually by my agricultural pursuits and by my purchases of land' (Hammond 1921, 15-16).

Although in 1816 Cobbett was convinced that his farming was a failure, his career as a political journalist suddenly regained momentum. He published a popular cheap register priced twopence and urged the labourers to press the case for parliamentary reform. However, in the face of agricultural unrest and attacks on threshing machines, Cobbett advised them to use non-violent tactics. For example, in his *Letter to the Luddites* he urged farm labourers not to riot, arguing that machinery brought with it lower labour costs. The money thus saved, he explained, could be used productively (Cobbett and Cobbett 1835-7, v, 19-25). It was a landlord's argument, not a starving labourer's, and, tellingly, Cobbett spoke as one who possessed a threshing machine.

In 1817, faced with growing labour unrest, the government introduced a series of repressive measures, among them one prohibiting assemblies of working men where Cobbett's cheap register had been read aloud. In March 1817, Cobbett spoke out against the suspension of Habeas Corpus at a public meeting in Winchester and, in the same month, fearing further imprisonment both for debt and for political agitation, he fled with his two eldest sons to Liverpool: 'merely with a trunk and as quick as a

Fig. 6. Portrait of Mrs Cobbett by an unknown artist, c. 1830.

By kind permission of Lady Lathbury.



postchaise would carry me' (Carlyle 1904, 201). From Liverpool he sailed for America where he took on a farm called Hyde Park on Long Island and continued to write the *Political Register*.

In the meantime, Mrs Cobbett, Anne and the younger children left Botley for London. Nancy was pregnant again, but expected to follow her husband shortly. Characteristically, Cobbett gave her careful instructions: 'Pray . . . do not venture too soon. Mr H. has told us that you must be confined first. The Autumn is boisterous. Do not set off later than first of September. Bring your Plate, linen and everything that you can . . . Hyde Park [has] a fine park, orchards, garden and fields and woods, for a year.' (Melville 1913, ii, 90, 91.)

Botley Hill, the smaller house to which the family had moved when Cobbett came out of Newgate, was repossessed for non-payment of rent, Botley House was put on the market and, in order to raise some ready cash, the livestock and deadstock of Fairthorn Farm were sold. For the truth was that Cobbett owed money to his creditors, publishers and printers, and to the local shopkeepers – in all nearly £28,000 (the estate was mortgaged for £16,000) (Spatar 1982, ii, 398). The two mortgagees were John Tunno, who wanted to foreclose, and John Reeves. Tunno was eventually persuaded to keep the estate intact, letting the farms rather than selling them off. Cobbett's friend, Richard Hinxman of Chilling, near Titchfield, suggested that a subscription be raised to pay off Cobbett's debts (Hunt 1820, iii, 476), thereby allowing him to return to England, but the Reformers rejected

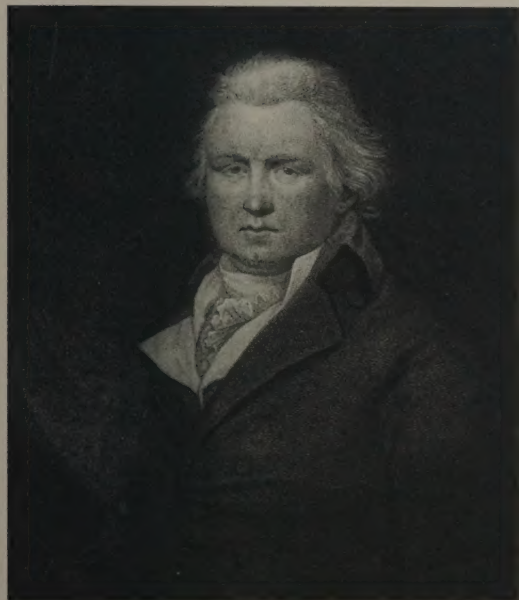
this proposal, declaring that Cobbett had deserted their cause just when he was needed.

In America Cobbett continued to write and farm, growing sweet corn. He was delighted to prove the *American Encyclopaedia* wrong when he raised cabbages successfully, and he introduced the cultivation of swedes. But his farmhouse burned down, forcing him to live in a tent made weatherproof by copies of old newspapers (Spatar 1982, ii, 376). Nevertheless, in 1818 he published *A Year's Residence in the United States* and *A Grammar of the English Language*.

In 1819 Cobbett returned to England and announced his intention to stand for Parliament. His progress from Liverpool through the manufacturing towns was a triumph. Mrs Cobbett and most of the family had come back to England earlier and were then living in London (fig. 6). Cobbett, however, refused to meet his wife anywhere except Botley, so she and the younger children found themselves once more at Botley House, which was lent back by Tunno, the mortgagee (Spatar 1982, ii, 389-90). Here they languished while Cobbett searched for a suitable constituency – once elected he would no longer be liable to arrest for debt. He appealed for election funds through the *Political Register*, explaining that he required only '2 pence each from six hundred thousand men and women . . . the money that is spent by the labouring classes on the mere foolish article of snuff in one single week.' 'Only think of the enormous sacrifice that I have made', he went on. '[Surely] you will . . . do some little trifling thing and what can be more trifling than the abstaining from the use of part of a pint of beer.' (PR 6.1.1820.)

Cobbett was convinced of his unique ability to deliver the country from all its ills. However, his attempt to win a seat at Coventry failed and he was forced to declare himself bankrupt, his estate being put in Chancery for three years. Cobbett rather optimistically expected to buy it back, or at least to realise something on the sale of the timber he had planted (Melville 1913, ii, 187). From November 1819 until December 1820 Mrs Cobbett and the younger children remained miserably at Botley, feeling neglected by Cobbett and ignored by the County. By now Nancy had devised her own method of meeting bills. When her husband sent their son John to settle with a draper at Southampton, the draper replied 'that he was in debt to Mrs Cobbett for a pig which she had let him have which more than paid off his bill' (Nuff. XVII/2/4). The whole family, except James who was still in America, was finally reunited in penury at 11, St Michael's Place, Brompton, in the Christmas of 1820. Cobbett told them: 'Help me to work children and I'll earn as good a place as Botley back again' (Nuff. XV, 43). He never did. For Cobbett

Fig. 7. Engraving of William Cobbett by Francesco Bartolozzi from a painting by John Raphael Smith, 1801. Cobbett was very aware of the value of self-publicity and in August 1806 ordered his assistant John Wright to bring four or five of these engravings to his second single-stick match held at Botley the next month (BL Add. MS 22906, August 1806). Farnham Museum.



there was nowhere that could ever compare with Botley.

What happened to Botley House? When the family finally left, the house was stripped and the contents sold. A notice in the *Hampshire Chronicle* advertised the pump, the kitchen range, the fireplaces and Register stoves (which Cobbett later recommended in *Cottage Economy*), the turret clock, which now adorns Botley church, 24 volumes of the *Political Register* and 24 volumes of Rapin's *History of England*, and the field beds which Cobbett had known as a soldier (HC 15.1.1821). The house itself was sold by Tunno's son to Mr John Jenkyns, a lawyer who owned Botley Hill (41M89/241). It was by then almost buried by the locust trees Cobbett had planted. Later Jenkyns demolished the residence and bought out the copyhold, and within 40 years only the outbuildings were left.

COBBETT THE COUNTRYMAN

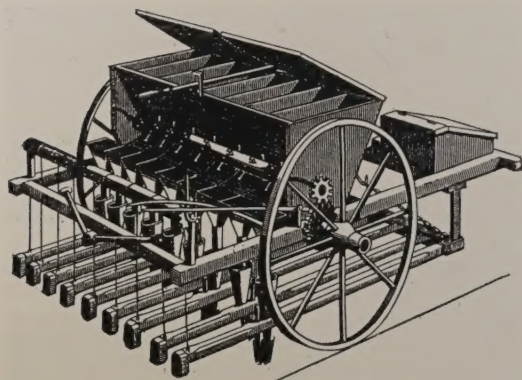
In 1804 Cobbett was delighted to be living in the country and flung himself into the sports he had enjoyed in his boyhood. He had written in the *Political Register* that contests such as boxing, wrestling and bull-baiting were character building, and in October 1805 he promoted a single-stick match. Two contestants fought each other with cudgels and the winner was the one to draw blood from his opponent's head; competitors from neighbouring counties were each allowed half a guinea for expenses (BL Add. MS 22906, 27.9.1805). Cobbett advertised widely, and among the local

gentry who came was Thomas Lewin Esq., of Ridgeway Castle, Southampton. Harriet Lewin, his daughter, recorded the event in her reminiscences of early life, paying particular attention to 'the celebrated Mr Cobbett, who presided on the platform and gave prizes . . . out of his own pocket' (Lewin 1909, ii, 139). The other 18 local farmers and millers who had subscribed to the expenses went unnoticed. Cobbett was obviously the star attraction (fig. 7).

Cobbett entertained his friends at Botley House: Lord and Lady Henry Stuart, Lord Cochrane, and Lord Folkestone all visited. He sent presents of salmon to others. He netted the Hamble which flowed through his grounds using a trammel-net sent down from London and was particularly gratified to discover that some of his fish had been sent on to Charles James Fox, who was to take up his last political post as Foreign Secretary the following year in the 'Ministry of All the Talents' (Cole 1924, 108). But hare-coursing was Cobbett's first love. He coursed locally on Curdridge Common, had an open invitation to Lord Clanricarde's estate at Warnford, and was invited to Rose Hill, Lord Northesk's estate near Winchester. He also spent days out coursing with Dr Mitford, father of the author Mary Russell Mitford. On one occasion, Cobbett took his favourite hound, Princess, to be matched against Dr Mitford's dog at Ludgershall in Wiltshire, where more than 70 dogs competed. Later he found shooting his own covers more entertaining and less time-consuming and sent for thick-haired Blenheim spaniels to replace his own which had died (Smith 1878, 99).

At the same time, Cobbett was a founding member of the Botley and South Hampshire Agricultural Society which encouraged farming skills. The change from the system of common fields to enclosure had given a great impetus to agricultural improvements and the larger landowners like Coke of Norfolk and Lord Egremont of Petworth were already experimenting with new breeds. Cobbett was keen to do likewise. In 1809 he and his friend, Cochrane Johnstone, came up with a scheme to import Spanish merino sheep on a large scale. Cobbett even wrote for advice to Sir John Sinclair, President of the Board of Agriculture, explaining that he could supply up to 20 shepherds and find pasture from Portsmouth to the market, which must have been Weyhill, a huge sheep fair held in October outside Andover (BL Bathurst Papers, WC-Sinclair, 20.6.1809). Nothing came of this scheme, but by 1812 Cobbett had 23 Spanish sheep and 217 half breeds, using South Downs and Ryelands. While in Newgate he estimated the feed required and ordered his men to make a south-facing sheep house and yard. Despite these efforts the Spanish sheep struggled in the damp English climate. In the autumn of 1815 Cobbett

Fig. 8. Print of a Norfolk drill taken from *An Encyclopaedia of Agriculture* by J. C. Loudon (1831). Cobbett used his drill in 1813 to sow wheat and was delighted with the speed at which the work was completed.
Rural History Centre, University of Reading.



bought yet more sheep, including Dorset ewes, explaining that his system of feeding them up on hay and root crops during the winter would bring him 400 lambs in the spring instead of the usual losses (Nuff. XXX, WC-HH, 24.10.1815).

Cobbett also bought Spanish jackasses, pointers and pigs to improve his stock, as well as American partridges. He tried feeding his cattle on swedes prepared by steaming, but his apparatus caught fire as did two of his barns (HC 24.10.1814). Cobbett was ever the innovator, ready to use new equipment. Fairthorn, for example, was stocked with a Norfolk drill cultivator (fig. 8), chaff-cutters, water-carriages with casks, a malt mill, a threshing machine and a patent winnowing machine. 'My farms were completely stocked with everything of the best kinds', he declared in 1821 (Duff 1974, 53).

After Cobbett had studied Jethro Tull's *Horse-Hoeing Husbandry* he began to farm using Tull's methods. Among other things, Tull advised farmers that wheat should be drilled out, not sown broadcast; not only was this method less labour-intensive, it also meant that wheat could be raised year after year on the same land without loss of yield. Accordingly, in 1813 Cobbett abandoned the growing of lucerne, although both plants and ground had already been prepared. At the outset he reckoned to grow 130 acres of wheat, but by 1814 he had revised his target to nearly 300 acres. That August he pronounced his spring wheat beautiful, and no more blighted than that of his neighbours from whom he had taken samples. However, carelessness over sowing winter instead of spring wheat, and a plague of mice, reduced his yield. Cobbett also grew swedes as Tull advised, with the plants transplanted on high furrows and the land between kept clean by ploughing (*Year's Residence*, para. 59).

Cobbett's country upbringing had taught him to prefer the shelter of woodlands to the open and windswept fields. He was passionately interested in

trees and foresaw an enormous market for the different species he had seen growing in America. By March 1809 he had planted out '20,000 oaks [some raised from acorns imported from America], elms & ashes besides . . . 3,000 fir trees' (Nuff. XXIX, WC-FR, 12.3.1809) and in 1810 he sowed 272,000 locust seeds to transplant on 100 acres of his land. While he was in Newgate, he was forced to reduce his planting but insisted that more acacia and quickset seeds should be sown and the ash seedlings tended. He went on: 'the plantations at Lockhams & Curdrige must be done . . . [and] the plantation of elms in Lower Barn Land Coppice will be worth a pound each in 12 years time' (Nuff. XXIX, WC-NC, 27.2.1811). When Cobbett proudly showed his American trees to Charles Vancouver who was making his tour of Hampshire for the Board of Agriculture, Vancouver remarked particularly on Cobbett's 'strong and flourishing . . . seed-bed of oaks' and noted his success in raising 'shell bark and common hickory, the honey and common locust, black and white walnut . . . sassafras catalpa'. This 'prodigious variety', he concluded, '[would] contribute . . . to the future decoration and improvement of the country.' (Vancouver 1810, 307.)

At Botley, Cobbett took the same care over the planting of his garden, shrubberies and orchards. He wanted instant results so put in mature trees – limes, planes and sycamores – round his house. When one of his plane trees died, his gardener Robinson cut it down. The next year, to Cobbett's surprise, it shot up again and was soon taller than its fellows. From this he concluded 'that those who want quickly fine plantations . . . should plant & [then] cut down to the ground' (BL Add. MS 22907, 17.9.1808). He later realised that younger trees transplanted more successfully and advocated this in his book, *The Woodlands*, published in 1825-8.

His kitchen garden was walled and his fruit trees trained as espaliers, with short straight branches which made protection and harvesting easier, something which Cobbett recommended in *The English Gardener* published in 1828. The hot bed for the cultivation of melons and early vegetables, he thought, should be enclosed on two sides by the walls of the kitchen garden, and by hedges of yew on the other two sides. His own hot bed was made by Robinson under the direction of William Cobbett junior, who had studied the subject in Marshall's gardening book. Cobbett also considered that most gentlemen's gardens should be close to a river or lake from which water could be led into the kitchen garden. The Hamble was Cobbett's water supply, although he was not a great advocate of watering and found that his workmen skimmed this task. Instead, he relied on deep trenching and well-

Fig. 9. Botley Hill, now known as Sherecroft, the smaller house of three bedrooms and two attic rooms to which Cobbett and his family moved for reasons of economy after his release from Newgate in 1812. He was hoping to rent out Botley House but was not successful.

Photograph: David Chun.

composted land to preserve moisture. (*English Gardener*, paras. 45, 115, 285.)

The lawn or 'grass-plat' Cobbett considered the beauty of any pleasure garden. He favoured good downland turf and advised that in summer the daisies and worm-casts should be removed midweek, so that early on Saturday morning the grass could be scythed very short before the dew dried. In this way he himself proved that an able workman could create a surface comparable to a green baize cloth. Cobbett loved yellow flowers, clumps of yellow crocuses and yellow tulips, but his favourite flower was the sweet william, planted in oblong beds. He also loved showy flowers: dahlias, daisies, petunias, marigolds, nasturtiums and stocks. He did not approve of the then current fashion for the picturesque, but preferred old-fashioned gardens with their formal lines of flowers and grass, bordering canals of water; his ideal was Sir William Temple's garden at Moor Park in Surrey. (*English Gardener*, paras. 57, 318.)

Cobbett directed that his gardens and shrubberies should be dissected by gravel paths, four feet wide and edged with box. The well-planted shrubbery, he believed, should consist of buckthorn, laburnum, white broom, lilac, locust trees and magnolia and he was also fond of the bird cherry and dogwood, both of which he later imported from America. Myrtle did well for him at Botley, and nothing surpassed the beauty of hops trained up stakes or through trees. Hedges of privet with red and white roses growing over them made pleasing divisions, and, for the front of the shrubbery, Cobbett favoured rosebay willow herb and rest-harrow. A greenhouse he considered essential, preferably built onto, and entered and viewed from, the sitting room. Here the early spring flowers could be enjoyed: snowdrops, crocuses, primroses, violets and cowslips. When these had finished, he thought the indoor vine already established there would provide interest. (*English Gardener*, paras. 55-6.)

In 1812 Cobbett acquired another garden when the family moved from Botley House to Botley Hill, a smaller house leased from Colonel James Kempt (Nuff. XV, 34; fig. 9). He now found himself with three-quarters of a mile of high walls for fruit trees and spent £150 on plants and trees, nectarines, peaches and vines which Dowse of Waltham Chase, an excellent gardener, was employed to prune and train. It must have been here that Cobbett devised the hedge and ditch, which he later described in his gardening book, to ward off young predators. His three vines in 1816 produced £300 worth of grapes, and in his hot bed he grew both melons and water melons, which he described as 'looking like frozen snow' (*English Gardener*, para. 275). Cobbett just managed to save his melons from total destruction



by the ants which had colonised his melon bed, by tracking them to their nest over the ceiling of his summer house and exultantly destroying them with boiling water.

Although he tells us how much his garden produced in 1816, the summer was cold and wet, the harvest poor, and there was also unemployment and widespread distress. As we have seen, the following year Cobbett fled to America, and although he left behind his papers, books and even his shirts, he made certain that he took with him 10 lbs. of swede seed, which he grew on the farm he took on Long Island. From America he sent back apple grafts which took well at Botley; he was intrigued by American varieties – 'the Doctor Apple, the Fall Pippin, New Town Pippin, the Greeny, the Summer Pear Main, Winter [Pear Main], Spitzenberg Pippin' (BL Add. MS 31127, WC-JC, 20.1.1820) – and he hoped to popularise them in England.

In 1819 Cobbett returned to England, leaving behind his son, James. The next year he exported flower seeds – broomstock, chinese hollyhocks, pinks and carnations – for James to sell and he bombarded his son with orders. There was a particularly good market, he thought, for sassafras, a type of laurel which he considered would make useful boundary hedges for the many new villas then being erected. 'Many attempts have been made to get it here but they have almost wholly failed', Cobbett observed. 'The seeds would be best . . . next fall you can send some trees.' (BL Add. MS 31127, WC-JC, 7.1.1820.) James was to plant out 1,000 cuttings as soon as the frosts were over and, meanwhile, to send one pound of rose seed. In April 1820 Cobbett sent James 'a few trees . . . to see whether they will live' (BL Add. MS 31127, WC-JC, 28.4.1820), and these were followed in May by 11 barrels of haws and one of trees. In return, he ordered James to send him 200 bushels of kidney beans, convinced that he would make an immense profit. This trade was later abandoned since Cobbett had not taken account of the labour costs involved in sorting seed, but sweet corn, broom-corn

Fig. 10. Print of the leaves, seeds and flowers of a locust tree, taken from André Michaux's *North American Sylva* published at Philadelphia between 1817 and 1819. Cobbett was convinced that locust wood was virtually imperishable and in 1809 planted six acres with locust and ash seeds. He also grew other American species on his estates at Botley. In 1824 he sent a copy of Michaux's *Sylva* to George Woodward, his agent in America, emphasising that he was only lending it and adding that it would teach him 'everything about the business of Seed Collector' (BL Add. MS 31127, WC-GW, 8.2.1824).

Linley Library.



and water melon seed all sold well, and pumpkin, cucumber and squash seeds were advertised in the *Political Register*. In all, some 40,000 acorns sent over from America in 1820 were sown in Chelsea and offered as seedlings at £1 per 100. They all sold within a month. (PR 17.2.1821 and 24.2.1821.)

Cobbett had begun his experiments at Botley and later grew stock in his nursery garden in Kensington. By now James had returned to England and George Woodward was Cobbett's contact in America. Cobbett sent Woodward two volumes of André Michaux's *Sylva* (fig. 10), available in London in 1821, and referred Woodward to the illustrations when identifying trees. Michaux, like his father, had been sent to America by the French government to discover which American trees would transfer to a cooler climate and be of practical use. His book was invaluable to Cobbett who sent out whitethorn seeds and imported, among other species, the box elder, cucumber tree, magnolia cordata, varieties of maple, canoe birch, water locust, white oak and persimmon. He was convinced that American trees would prove superior to native timber; for example, he thought persimmon was excellent for coach poles, while live oak and swamp

timber offered potential for shipbuilding. (BL Add. MS 31127, WC-GW, 1823-4.)

When Cobbett made an agreement with his friend Mr Rogers, the Southampton carrier, he even sent out a mail coach to be copied in white oak and locust wood, which he knew were lighter than English timber. The intention was to race this American coach against an English one. Success, he hoped, would provide an enormous market for Cobbett's seedlings. 'Bear in mind', he wrote Woodward, 'the sale perhaps of 100,000 trees will depend on this.' (BL Add. MS 31127, WC-GW, 23.7.1824.) Cobbett predicted that acacia, which he reckoned to be indestructible, would become indispensable to the farmer, but he had not counted on the fact that the English climate made it impossible to grow acacia in any quantity. Although Cobbett was awarded a silver medal by the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce for his services to agriculture and village industries (Spater 1982, ii, 431), nevertheless through a combination of naivety and misadventure, the fortune he hoped to make from his arboreal enterprises continued to elude him.

COBBETT'S LABOURERS

Cobbett's intensive farming and forestry at Botley required a large labour force. So how did he treat his labourers? In 1810 agricultural wages in Hampshire were generally nine shillings a week in winter, 12 shillings in summer (Vancouver 1810, 385). Cobbett paid more – from 10 to 16 shillings – but he struggled to pay his men on time. In 1808 he wrote to his editor, Wright: 'I wish you could send me £10 this week . . . my men must be paid or I look mean.' (BL Add. MS 22907, 20.9.1808.) That October he was in debt to one of his men, Maidment, for six weeks work at 12 shillings a week. Meanwhile, Maidment had been forced to borrow 18 shillings, while Cobbett allowed him pork on tick. Another employee, Cobbett's gamekeeper, Cowerd, was promised extra payments for catching vermin and poachers and 20 bushels of potatoes a year and was allowed two rods of garden ground, but after the first winter he had to find fuel for himself (Nuff. XIII, 10.12.1808).

Cobbett much preferred to pay his men in kind rather than cash (a system he used also in 1827 at his farm at Barn Elms). For example, when, in 1816, Cobbett built his own mill he paid part of his men's wages in flour. Cobbett considered that 'every farmer . . . ought to pay nothing in money which he can pay in anything but money'. Significantly, however, the men did not get their flour at cost price; instead, Cobbett pocketed the profit that ordinarily would have gone to the dealer and miller. He was unapologetic about this practice, arguing that his men 'have better flour for the same money'. (*Cottage Economy*, para. 97.)

Fig. 11. View of the main street, Botley, from Mudie's Hampshire (1838). On the left is the Dolphin Inn where Jesse Burgess and his family stayed in 1809, the night before Jesse escaped, and in the background the new parish church built in 1836 after Cobbett's death.
Hampshire Record Office.



During the period 1808-1810 Cobbett employed more than 57 people, most of them at day-work or task-work, but he had a semi-permanent staff of five (Nuff. XIII). Two of these five, probably Dean and Robinson, he insured against being drawn for the militia to serve in the Napoleonic Wars, and it is perhaps not coincidental that of his original labourers only these two were still in his employ in 1812. Cobbett's men lived in his two farmhouses which each housed two labourers, and in the tied cottages he had built on his estate. If a man was sacked he lost both his job and his house. When in 1811 Cobbett sent down two younger ploughmen, he dismissed his inefficient old ploughmen, Trowbridge and Hart, but he did at least allow Hart to remain in his cottage through the winter (Nuff. XXIX: WC-WC jun., 1.10.1811; WC-FR, 7.1.1812).

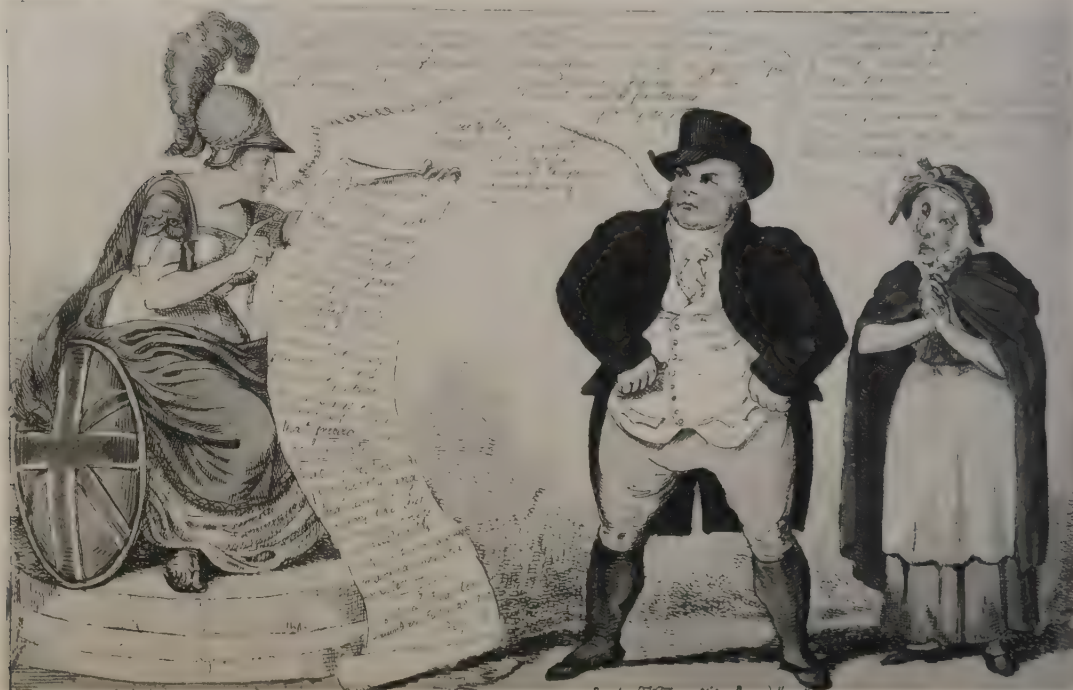
Cobbett was not necessarily an easy man to serve. Although he wrote in *Two-Penny Trash* in October 1830 that 'no man . . . quitted me by choice', this was not in fact the case (*Two-Penny Trash* 1.10.1830, 85). In 1809 Faithful, one of his team of mowers, left him and that same year one of his hired boys, Jesse Burgess, ran away. Cobbett's treatment of Burgess deserves close scrutiny. A boy of 15, he was employed by Cobbett as a living-in carter. Twice Cobbett found

him in bed when he should have been in his stable looking after the horses. Jesse was clearly terrified of Cobbett and on both occasions he fled home to his mother at Droxford, eight miles away. On the first occasion he was persuaded to return to Cobbett, whom he was legally bound to serve. On the second occasion, however, he refused to return. (HC 24.7.1809.)

Cobbett therefore obtained a warrant from Mr Smith, a magistrate in Southampton, for Jesse's arrest and, accordingly, Jesse was arrested at his home in Droxford by Mr Aslett, the Botley constable. The whole party, which also included Jesse's mother and his brother, William, walked to Botley, where, as it was now getting late, they stopped the night at the Dolphin (fig. 11). The next day Jesse, who had been left in the charge of the tithingman, Dummer, escaped. William and Mrs Burgess, meanwhile, set out for Droxford. Finding Jesse missing, Aslett pursued William and Mrs Burgess and arrested them for collusion in Jesse's escape. He then reported to Cobbett at Botley House and asked for instructions. Cobbett in turn told Aslett to take the prisoners to Mr Smith in Southampton, he then went on in his gig and they all met – Cobbett, Aslett, Mrs Burgess, William and Dummer – in the magistrate's office. After further delay, while Cobbett went to find the

Fig. 12. 'Britannia, the Political Egotist and the Old Woman of Botley', a satirical print by Cruikshank lampooning Cobbett's heavy-handed treatment of Jesse Burgess, 1809. The old woman on the right represents Jesse Burgess's mother.

British Library.



magistrate, the prisoners were released on the understanding that they would bring Jesse to Southampton as soon as possible. (HC 24.7.1809; PR 29.7.1809.)

When Cobbett returned to the magistrate's office, William asked him 'to let them free as soon as they could, as his mother had walked a great many miles that day and had a great many more to walk back'. How they were to get home he did not know. Cobbett replied, 'get home how you can' (HC 24.7.1809). So William and his mother set off on a cold March evening, finally reaching Droxford at 11 p.m. As it happened, William worked for Mr Goodlad, the magistrate who had authorised the closing up of the footpath through Cobbett's estate, and he, it appears, advised the Burgesses that they could claim against Cobbett, Aslett and Dummer for wrongful arrest. It is also likely that Goodlad advised on the amount of damages (£1,000).

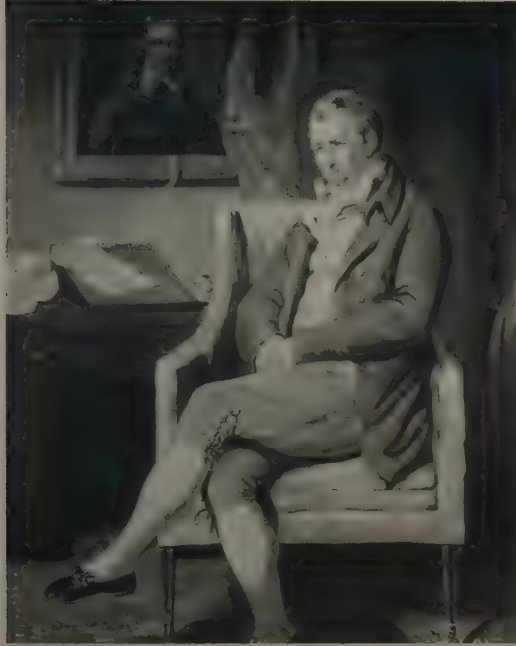
The case was heard in Winchester. Counsel for the prosecution described Cobbett as a person who publicly supported the poor but privately oppressed them and further said that Aslett and Dummer should not be charged because Cobbett was the instigator of the case and therefore wholly responsible for its prosecution (fig. 12). Cobbett's counsel countered that since the witnesses were all from the same family the

charge was a pack of lies. The jury, however, found for the Burgesses and awarded them damages of £10. By the next day the case was headline news in London. (PR 29.7.1809.)

Cobbett used most of the next issue of the *Political Register* to defend his actions. He repudiated the attack on his reputation, he pointed out that he paid his labourers a third more than Mr Goodlad did in Droxford and claimed that his men liked him because of his frankness, adding 'that reserve, that distant behaviour . . . [to] my inferiors I despise' (PR 29.7.1809). It was his duty to his neighbours, he said, to pursue Jesse and, unlike many, he always did his duty. Mrs Burgess and William were hardly mentioned and then only dismissively: they had been in custody for merely nine hours, Cobbett noted, which meant that they had lost only a day's work. He did not stop to consider that he had illegally forced them to go to Southampton. Jesse Burgess had defied both the law and Cobbett by running away and had to be punished. And if his mother and brother interfered in the matter, then they, too, had to be shown who was master.

The following year Cobbett himself was in prison (fig. 13). Realising that his farming costs were too high, he economised by sacking four of his workforce. He also invested in a threshing machine. Threshing occupied a lot of labour during the winter

Fig. 13. Engraving of William Cobbett in Newgate by William Ward, 1812, from a painting by John Raphael Smith. Fittingly, Cobbett sits in front of a portrait of an earlier radical, John Hampden, which was possibly supplied by Cobbett's friend Peter Walker. Walker, Ann Cobbett writes, went off to his house in Westminster and from it brought furnishings for Cobbett's room (Nuff. XV, 25).
Farnham Museum.



months (in 1810 Cobbett had paid Cottle, one of his casual labourers, £3 1s. 6d. for threshing and winnowing, 118 bushels of wheat). Determined to buy in as little seed as possible, by January 1812 Cobbett had his men threshing out white vetches, barley and two sorts of clover seed. The threshing machine cost him £60 but he found that it could thresh 40 bushels in one day with only one horse and a boy. (Nuff. XXX, WC-HH, 22.11.1813.)

In addition, Cobbett no longer sowed his seed broadcast but bought a seed drill and was delighted to inform his friend, Henry Hunt, that he had drilled 15 acres of wheat in one day with only '1 man, 2 girls, 1 boy & 3 horses' (Nuff. XXX, WC-HH, 22.11.1813). The same method he was pleased to discover also used much less seed. Similarly, Cobbett drilled his swedes on high ridges which were then hoed. In 1812 the men demanded a guinea an acre for this type of work, but Cobbett refused and instead used young women at the same price he paid them for transplanting. The experiment proved a great success; Cobbett declared that the young women were more biddable than his men, and at one shilling and eight pence an acre they were certainly cheaper. (*Year's Residence*, para. 85.)

As we have seen, Cobbett was an innovator but, not surprisingly, he found his workmen unreceptive to his ideas: 'they think [that] what their fathers did was best' (*Year's Residence*, para. 86). He hated his men wasting his time, so considered the mill he built in

one of his barns a good investment, for it kept them occupied on rainy days. There were other problems, too. While he extolled Mr Chamberlayne of Weston Grove, Southampton, who never gave his day labourers less than 13 shillings a week, whatever the market conditions, Cobbett could never afford to be so generous or understanding. By 1815, for instance, he was paying his workmen 10-12 shillings a week (HC 13.2.1815).

Cobbett himself reveals his relationship with his workers when he reports a conversation he had with Emery, one of his casual labourers. This man had made an agreement with Cobbett's son to dig 600 rods (3,330 yards or almost two miles) of drainage furrows at nine pence for 20 rods (110 yards) and came to Cobbett for payment of the £1 2s. 6d. Cobbett owed him for completing the job. Cobbett considered that the price had been set too high – it should have been one penny less at only eight pence for 20 rods – and declared that, since the price of bread and bacon had come down, the price of labour must also come down. Emery agreed that bread and bacon were cheaper but said everything else was still as expensive; he himself spent 4s. 6d. a week on '1½ oz of tea and 3lb of sugar' and potatoes were certainly as dear as ever. At Emery's admission that he lived on potatoes and tea Cobbett exploded. It was no wonder that Emery had a son of 19 'too weakly to do man's work', and that the whole family were 'as thin as owlettes', when their diet was one of tea and potatoes instead of home-brewed beer and bread. Emery replied 'Sir it is easy to talk . . . how am I to brew without barrels or anything to brew with?' Cobbett was not impressed. He asserted that Emery's diet was one which must 'multiply your cares . . . give you a brood of puny children . . . lower your spirit . . . impoverish your blood and . . . shorten your days of labour and of life.' Finally Cobbett grudgingly handed over the £1 2s. 6d. which Emery had earned. However, in Cobbett's eyes it was 2s. 6d. too much. He now considered that Emery owed him 2s. 6d. and said so, adding the rider 'and when you pay it me I will employ you again and not before'. (Cobbett and Cobbett 1835-7, iv, 403-5.) In the face of malnutrition and deprivation Cobbett expected that his labourers should be open to the logic of his arguments.

Although in *Rural Rides* Cobbett projected himself as the benevolent countryman, who, going without his lunch, bestowed the money saved on the half-starved labourer, the reality at Botley was very different. Cobbett's estate was run strictly as a commercial venture; he employed the cheapest labour available and argued that it was not his responsibility to comfort the unemployed harvestmen 'who now surround our door cap in hand' (PR 4.6.1814). Their



H. Gillman and J. H. R. Humphreys **The Life of WILLIAM COBBETT**, — written by himself.
 London Published Sept. 27, 1839 — by H. R. Humphreys, 27, St. James's Street.

Plate 7th

I did not look behind me, till I got to St Omer's — & thence fled to America: here I offered to become a Spy for the English Government, which was scornfully rejected; — I then turned to Plunder & Libel the Yankees for which I was Paid 5000 Dollars & kicked out of the Country! — I came back to England (after absconding for Seven years), & set up the Crown & Milre to establish my Loyalty, accepted from the Doctor £4000. to print & disperse a pamphlet against the Hell fire yell of Reform! — but applied the Money to purchase an estate at Botley, & left J^r Doctor to pay the Paper & Printing! — being now Lord of the Manor, I began by sowing the Seeds of discontent through Hampshire; I oppressed the Poor, sent the Aged to Hell, & demanded the Eyes of my Parish Apprentices before they were opened in the morning! — & being now supported by a band of Reformers, I renewed my old favourite Toast of Damnation to the House of Brunswick! & retailed by the sale of 10000 Political-Registers every week, I find myself the greatest Man in the World, — except that Idol of all my Adorations, his Royal & Imperial Majesty, NAPOLEONE!

See my own Memorials in Political Register 1839.

Fig. 14 (facing). 'The Life of William Cobbett, written by himself', No. 7 in Gillray's series of prints satirising the life and political career of William Cobbett, September 1809. Cobbett is depicted proposing a toast to the damnation of the house of Brunswick. His fellow radicals, among them Horne Tooke, Burdett and Folkestone, are depicted drinking French brandy and Botley ale. Note the references to Cobbett's alleged oppression of the poor and to his alleged admiration for Napoleon.

Farnham Museum.

poverty he wrote in the *Political Register* had been caused by bad government, high taxation and paper money. Cobbett's solution to these problems was to replace bad government with good (fig. 14). Indeed, two years earlier, in 1812, he had proposed putting himself forward as a candidate for Parliament, but the electors of Hampshire were not persuaded and he did not proceed to the contest.

THE LION OF BOTLEY

Cobbett and the Poor

During the early nineteenth century every parish levied a poor rate which was used to support the infirm, elderly and orphaned. This rate fell heavily on landowners and farmers, as land was rated more highly than houses (Baugh 1975). Nevertheless Cobbett approved of it, since he argued that the poor were entitled to be nurtured by the land they tilled, and he upheld the old poor laws. But he was totally opposed to the Poor Law Act of 1834, because it forced the poor away from their parishes and segregated them in Union workhouses. (PR 6.4.1833 and 9.8.1834.)

Cobbett, however, was no believer in equality; poverty, he thought, was an inescapable fact of life and a spur to greater effort. When he discovered two families with between them 16 children, who regularly but in his view wrongly received relief from the poor rate, he, together with neighbouring farmers, took the case to the magistrates. Cobbett offered to pay the money the families received out of his own pocket. They refused his offer, and Cobbett tells us from that moment they looked cleaner and became respectable, but received no parish help (PR 29.7.1809). He was equally dismissive of poor clubs. When called upon for a subscription he refused, replying that 'it is good that we should be daily exposed to accidents and infirmities . . . every individual should rely upon himself only' (Lewin 1909, i, 123).

As it happened, Cobbett served on a committee of Bishops Waltham vestry when extra accommodation for paupers was needed (the existing workhouse had become too small). The vestry proposed that the new poorhouse should adjoin the isolation hospital (Pest House) in Waltham Chase (HRO 30M77/PV1, 30.9.1808). There was no discussion of the possibility of cross-infection, though both the vestry and Cobbett were well aware of the hazards. Cobbett had made sure that his own children were inoculated against smallpox before they were six weeks old. He did not approve of the vaccination with cowpox, discovered by Jenner in 1796. To him this amounted to putting 'the diseased blood . . . of a beast . . . into . . . human beings', and he disapproved strongly of the £20,000 awarded

Jenner for what Cobbett termed 'quackery' (*Advice to Young Men*, paras. 261-2).

The workhouse accommodated mostly the aged and orphans. When these children were considered capable of helping in a household they were balloted out at the Easter vestry to prosperous families. In 1816, Cobbett himself was allotted one of these parish orphans, Jane Collins, aged ten (30M77/PV1, 10.4.1816; fig. 15); he was furious, writing bitterly that these 'young paupers [must] be kept . . . clothed, fed, lodged and doctored . . . until they grew up to be men and women' (Reitzel 1933, 165). He reckoned he already supported 28 paupers, and Jane was an extra burden he thought he did not deserve. Cobbett wrote as if Jane lived on him till she married, but, in fact, she stayed with the Cobbetts less than a year. In 1817 Cobbett fled to America and Mrs Cobbett and the family retired to London. At a vestry the following year, Jane, now 11, was balloted out again, this time to George Bond, tanner and overseer for Waltham tithing (HRO 30M77/PV1, 6.6.1817).

Cobbett's Turnpike

Cobbett's improvements to his estate included the construction of a turnpike in 1809, which was designed to give him easy access to the local market-towns and reduce the journey-time between Gosport and Winchester. But because this new road threatened to remove trade from Bishops Waltham it was not universally popular. Local people took shares and meetings were held at the George and Dragon in Fair Oak (HC 8.5.1809, 22.5.1809). Cobbett himself bought ten shares and secured the passage of the necessary Act of Parliament. He also appointed the surveyor and supervised the making of the road where it passed through his land. Upkeep of the road fell on the parishes of Bishops Waltham, Droxford and Titchfield, which appointed highway surveyors to oversee general maintenance of the roads. Parishioners, moreover, were legally required to contribute their labour, though this could be commuted to money and the surveyors were authorised to levy a highway rate.

Cobbett came out of Newgate in 1812 an angry and embittered man. He was heavily in debt, his estate was run down, his part of the road in decay and he was determined to get redress. The law was his only recourse and he immediately summoned the parishes of Bishops Waltham, Droxford and Titchfield to court for failing to repair his road (figs. 16-17). But Cobbett was dissatisfied with the proceedings at Quarter Sessions in Winchester, and so took the cases up to the King's Bench in London. Titchfield was exonerated, but Droxford's case was complicated by the fact that each of its tithings – Shedfield, Hill, Swanmore and Droxford – was responsible for its own portion of road. Shedfield

Fig. 15. Extract from Bishops Waltham vestry minutes for 10 April 1816 recording the balloting of pauper children to parishioners. Among those listed is Jane Collins who was assigned to William Cobbett.
Hampshire Record Office, 30M77/PV1.

April 10th 1816.

At a Vestry Meeting this Day held in consequence of the above Order the following Persons being present - viz. Mr. Sumner, Mr. Sturt, Mr. Budd, Mr. West, Mr. Wagnor, Mr. Guillaume, Mr. Perin, Mr. Houghston, Mr. Wyatt, Mr. Nation - the following children were ~~ballotted~~ ballotted to the Persons named as below.

Sarah Boyce	13 years	To	Mr. H ^o Lees
Elizabeth Boyce	11		Mr. Jeffries
Harriet Seale	11		Mr. John Birt
Jane Collins	10		Mr. William Cobbett
George Smith	13		Mr. Perin
Sarah Smith	12		Mr. Mary Grant
Thos May	10		Mr. Edward Griffith
Sarah Cawte	11		Mr. William Guillaume
Elizabeth Cawte	14		Mr. John Simpkins
Phoebe Palmer	15		Mr. John Walters
Abigail Palmer	13		Mr. Robert Woodman
John Palmer	11		Mr. William Weston
Martin Woodcutler	13		Mr. Chas. Barrett

<div style="display: inline-block; vertical-align: middle;"> <p>Samuel West</p> <p>Wm. Mule</p> <p>John Nation</p> <p>Wm. Guillaume</p> </div> <div style="display: inline-block; vertical-align: middle; font-size: 3em; margin: 0 10px;">}</div> <div style="display: inline-block; vertical-align: middle;"> <p>(Churchwardens)</p> </div>	<div style="display: inline-block; vertical-align: middle;"> <p>John Wyatt</p> <p>Robert Budd</p> <p>Geo. Wagnor</p> </div> <div style="display: inline-block; vertical-align: middle; font-size: 3em; margin: 0 10px;">}</div> <div style="display: inline-block; vertical-align: middle;"> <p>Parsons</p> </div>
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Wm. Jennings

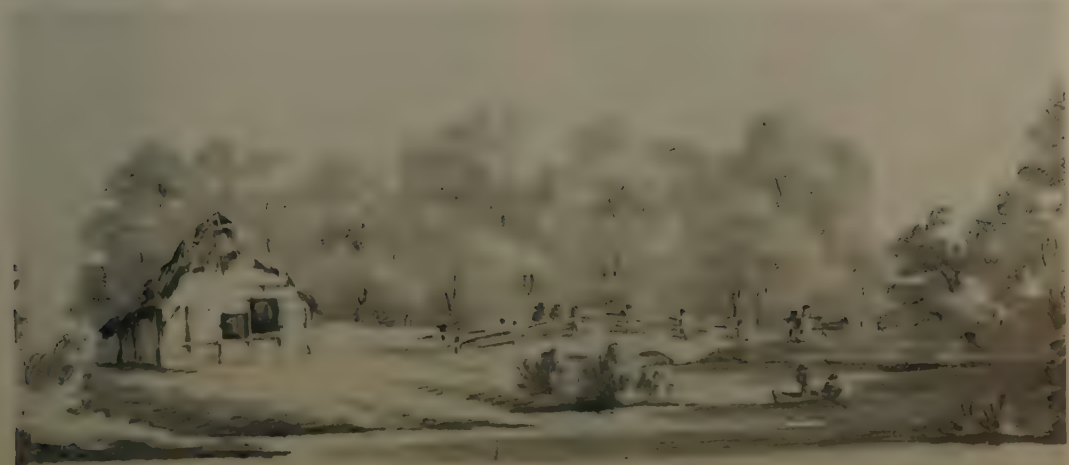
Fig. 16. Detail from a map showing the roads in the parishes of Bishops Waltham, Titchfield and Droxford as they passed through William Cobbett's estates. The map was drawn up in February 1813 in connection with Cobbett's dispute with the three parishes over the maintenance of these roads.

Hampshire Record Office, 44M73/E/P68.



Fig. 17 (below). Sketch of the road and bridge at Curbridge, from a series of sketches of Botley and the surrounding area made between c. 1827 and 1831 by 'EAJ' (probably Elizabeth Anne Jenkyns, sister of John Jenkyns of Botley Hill). In 1810 Cobbett was employing labourers to fell and lop trees at Curbridge.

Hampshire Record Office, 130M83/PZ13.



tithing was, in fact, responsible for Cobbett's road, but Cobbett had summoned the whole parish. Counsel's opinion was sought, and found that on this occasion only the whole parish should pay expenses. There were no funds to meet these legal costs, so the vestry authorised that they should be paid from the poor rate. (HRO 66M76/PV3, 28.1.1813, 13.1.1814.)

In the case of Bishops Waltham, Cobbett summoned the parish for two stretches of road, one going towards Fareham, the other towards Wickham. Mr Seymour, surgeon, and Mr Clark, merchant, gave evidence for the parish in London and the case was returned yet again to Quarter Sessions. The vestry authorised the hire of counsel and the charging of expenses (HRO 30M77/PV1, 12.2.1813), and as a result, the highway rate rose from twopence to sixpence in the pound. This proved insufficient, however; so, to make up the deficit, vestry allowed 'the cost of defending the Indictments . . . preferred by Mr Cobbett out of the Poor Rate' (HRO 30M77/PV1, 17.6.1814). The vestry was still paying off these legal costs in 1815 when Mr Houghton, overseer of Hoe, recorded £20 paid to 'Mr Gunner in part on account of Mr Cobbett's indictment.' (HRO 30M77/PO8.) Cobbett complained bitterly about the increasing cost of the poor rate, but it is quite clear that his own actions contributed considerably to this increase. To make matters worse, in 1814 Cobbett himself found difficulty in producing his share of poor rate. He had counted on corn prices staying high but they had fallen, so his investment in machinery at Fairthorn Farm had not produced the profits he had envisaged, and his steaming shed and two of his barns had burnt down. So, when Mr Haynes, the overseer for Curdridge, came to collect his poor rate Cobbett did not have the cash available. The following year, however, he did pay off this debt to the parish and Mr John Nation triumphantly recorded in his accounts, 'To Cash received of Mr Cobbett . . . Uncollected money of last year £20 2s. 6d.' (HRO 30M77/PO8.)

Enclosure

When the Napoleonic Wars ended in 1815, the soldiers returned to their parishes. Everyone expected that peace would bring prosperity and a reduction in taxation and in the high cost of living. It did not. There was still a huge debt to be paid off, and those farmers who had made enormous profits on corn while none could be imported, now reduced the land under cultivation and, with it, the labour force. Unemployment, together with the wet summer of 1816, compounded the labourers' distress (Charlesworth (ed.) 1983).

In 1816 the ratepayers of Bishops Waltham were summoned to a special vestry to plan how best to use the poor rate to provide shelter, food and work

for the poor during the coming winter. Cobbett rode over with a proposition. Earlier he had written in the *Political Register* that he was entitled to enclose 60 to 100 acres of very good land (Cobbett and Cobbett 1835-7, iv, 263). His proposal now was to enclose not his own land but that of the Bishop of Winchester, as lord of the manor. He suggested that the vestry ask the Bishop to allow small enclosures to be made on the commons, which would be given to married labourers to support their families. Some families had already settled on the commons and enclosed them illegally. Cobbett proposed that these squatters, if they were parishioners, should be given legal title to their holdings. Thereby he would achieve three of his most cherished objectives: he would reduce the poor rate, make the poor self-supporting and remove land from church ownership. (HRO 30M77/PV1, 18.10.1816.)

Fifteen years earlier Arthur Young, Secretary to the Board of Agriculture, had made such a proposal for the whole country which had been rejected (Edwards (ed.) 1898, 351). A similar fate befell Cobbett's scheme, not least because all the parties involved felt threatened. The copyhold tenants feared they would lose part of the commons on which their livelihood depended. Here they kept their cows and pigs, as Cobbett knew very well. The farmers were also alarmed. The commons, particularly Waltham Chase, had long been invaded by illegal settlers. If legal title were given to them, both they and their families would be entitled to relief from the poor rates; these, in turn, would rise and with them farming costs. (*Year's Residence*, para. 313.)

Nevertheless, Cobbett had made the parish aware of what had been happening to its commons, and a year and a half later the copyholders took action. They set out from the turnpike gates and destroyed the illegal enclosures: in fact Cobbett had produced an effect precisely the opposite of what he had intended (HRO 30M77/PV1, 19.6.1818). Food for the poor continued to be a problem. In 1831 Bishops Waltham vestry petitioned the Bishop of Winchester for waste land and, as a result, he agreed to the enclosure of allotments on Waltham Chase for the use of the poor, but the parishioners again broke these new enclosures down. The vestry tried again in 1832 when it adopted the Labourers Allotment System and rented five acres in each tithing. This was given to persons with more than three children (a quarter of an acre per child) on the understanding that after the first year's harvest the family would not be entitled to poor relief. (HRO 30M77/PV2, 29.11.1832.)

Cobbett and the Church

Cobbett had been brought up in the Church of England on the authorised version of the Bible; its language and its stories had become a part of him.

Fig. 18. Print of Bishops Waltham parish church from the south east, taken from the *Gentleman's Magazine*, November 1800.

Hampshire Record Office, 15M84/P3/62.



When he reproved a drunken Botley man he cited Genesis, he likened his own trials to those of St Paul and he inferred that he was wiser than Solomon. Not surprisingly, the Methodist movement was anathema to him, although he did approve of Roman Catholic emancipation. (*Rural Rides*, 187, 188; *Protestant 'Reformation'*, letter i, para. 5.)

The two clergymen Cobbett knew best in Hampshire were Richard Baker of Botley, where he attended church, and James Ogle of Bishops Waltham, where he attended vestry (fig. 18). Both were well connected. Richard Baker had obtained Botley through the influence of Henry Addington, who became Prime Minister shortly after his appointment; James Ogle was presented to Bishops Waltham by the Bishop of Winchester, Brownlow North, to whom he was related by marriage. (*Protestant 'Reformation'*, letter iv, para. 124.)

Cobbett and Richard Baker soon became intimate friends, sharing a common interest in farming and hare-coursing. Cobbett bought Alderney cows and a German horse from Baker and the families were on visiting terms. When Cobbett attacked government corruption at a meeting of freeholders in Winchester, it was Richard Baker who seconded the motion (Smith 1878, 72). However, this harmony did not last. Baker had a reputation for keenness in money matters and pew-rents and tithes, in particular, and Cobbett, for his part, thought Baker had cheated him over some bad straw. When Cobbett was imprisoned in 1810, Baker called on Mrs Cobbett, much to her husband's fury. 'I wish to God that you never had renewed your acquaintance with Baker', he wrote from Newgate. 'He is a scoundrel, and so I will tell him.' (Melville 1913, ii, 68.) The feeling was mutual. When Cobbett made his triumphant return to Botley at the end of his two-year prison sentence, Baker refused to allow the church bells to be rung in his honour (Melville 1913, ii, 72).

As Cobbett increased his landholding he found the imposition of the tithe extremely onerous and reckoned it cost him eight shillings an acre. He could see no reason why the labour and capital he provided to improve the productivity of his land should result

in higher tithes. In his arguments against payment of tithe he ridiculed Baker: 'Why cannot you reverence God, without Baker and his wife ... eating up a tenth part of the corn and milk and eggs and lamb and pigs and calves that are produced in Botley parish?' (*Year's Residence*, para. 433). In fact, Cobbett paid tithe chiefly to James Ogle. The difference was that Cobbett admired Ogle. He wrote appreciatively of him in *Rural Rides* and also supported him in an altercation in vestry in September 1816 when Ogle wished to exchange 'the weekly prayers on Wednesdays and Fridays for a sermon on Sunday afternoons' – a proposition which 16 parishioners considered 'highly improper' (HRO 30M77/PV1, 20.9.1816).

Before he fled to America in 1817, Cobbett spoke to a freeholders' meeting in Winchester where the clergy joined in barracking him. He condemned the Church as too powerful, grasping and anti-Reform. Parsons, he argued, could hold several livings and reside in none of them. Some took their stipends and paid a curate a meagre salary to conduct services. Cobbett also attacked the bishops, asking whether Christ chose 'for his Apostles, men with immense estates ... scores of gamekeepers ... having palaces for their places of residence, having parks well stocked with deer ... and gardens coming up to Mahomet's idea of Elysium?' (PR 14.9.1822.) He considered that tithe and church property, which had formerly been used to relieve poverty, were now being misused to support the parson and his family in gentility. In America, by contrast, he found a church which functioned successfully without either tithe or land.

After his return to England in 1819 Cobbett issued his own collection of sermons in which he took the clergy to task. In 1822, predicting the collapse of the church, he wrote to Dr Taylor in New York, 'I expect the church property ... will be made very free with in a very short time' (BL Add. MS 31127, WC-Dr Taylor, 2.7.1822). Subsequently, in *A History of the Protestant 'Reformation'* (1824-6) Cobbett argued that the church should be disestablished since it had stolen land from the poor at the time of the Reformation. In the meantime, he continued to denounce tithes and his polemics swelled the tide that led to the passage of the Tithe Commutation Act in 1836. Cobbett thought of himself as a member of the Church of England to the end of his days, but his criticisms of the church as established never diminished.

CONCLUSION

In 1821 Cobbett quickly created another political opportunity for himself by supporting Caroline's claim to be crowned Queen. He wrote many of the loyal addresses which she received and used her

Fig. 19. View of Botley 'from the west window in the drawing room at Botley Hill' drawn between c. 1827 and 1831 by 'EAJ' (probably Elizabeth Anne Jenkyns, sister of John Jenkyns of Botley Hill).

Hampshire Record Office, 130M83/PZ13.



situation to arouse popular discontent against the King and the government. Indeed, Cobbett's daughter, Anne, hoped he might become the Queen's 'Prime Minister' (Melville 1913, ii, 180). But Caroline died in 1821, and with her Cobbett's immediate prospects of political advancement.

Cobbett now established his nursery at Kensington and began the production of many influential books and pamphlets. These included *Cobbett's Poor Man's Friend* (1826), *A Treatise on Cobbett's Corn* (1828) and *The Emigrant's Guide* (1829). His chief means of keeping up his pressure for parliamentary reform was his rural rides which he used to meet people, to spread opposition to the government and to present himself as the saviour of the country. He called it his haranguing system. (BL Add. MS 31127, WC-Dr Taylor, 2.7.1822.) Cobbett's rides constantly brought him back to Botley (fig. 19), where he relived his jousts with the parson and gazed with longing on the farms and trees he had once owned. He finally achieved his ambition of winning a parliamentary seat at the 1832 election. But he was too old at 69 to adapt to parliamentary ways and found the late sittings particularly exhausting. By now he was leasing a farm at Ash in Surrey and it was here that he died in 1835. (Spater 1982, ii, 520, 527.)

Cobbett was a man of contradictions. He decried the conditions of the labouring classes but at Botley,

when it was in his power to do so, did little to alleviate them. He poured scorn on the farmer who introduced machinery to reduce labour costs, but his barns at Fairthorn were full of labour-saving equipment. He bought up land in Hampshire as speculation, a practice he was not slow to condemn in others. By the time he returned from America he had attacked the whole of Hampshire society; the gentry for its monopoly of power and government money, the clergy 'who care nothing for the good will of their . . . parish', and the farmers – 'generally the most stupid as well as most slavish and most churlish part of the nation' (*Year's Residence*, paras. 442, 116). His writings had produced an immense impact in the industrial towns; small wonder that when he did return to England he had to go to Oldham in Lancashire to find a constituency to elect him (Spater 1982, ii, 504).

Cobbett possessed not only a biting wit but also a personal magnetism which greatly impressed those who met him. His achievements were outstanding. His writings contributed enormously to the education and self-confidence of the labouring people. He also left us a detailed survey of the England of his day, which is still recognisable from his passionate descriptions. 'I wrote for fame', Cobbett says in his *Advice to a Husband*, and fame has been his lasting achievement (*Advice to Young Men*, para. 215).

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JM	John Mears
JMC	John Morgan Cobbett
JW	John Wright
NC	Nancy Cobbett
Nuff.	Nuffield College
PR	<i>Political Register</i>
WC	William Cobbett
WC jun.	William Cobbett junior

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Barbara Biddell's interest in local history began at school when, encouraged by Hilda Grieve FRHS, she was awarded the Emmison Prize for a piece of original research by Essex Record Office. She gained her MA from St Andrew's University. She lived in Bishops Waltham for 13 years and while there became interested in the history of the parish, working on the wealth of local documents she found carefully stored in the parish chest and which are now held at Hampshire Record Office. After living in Stockport and Chester, she moved to Sussex and is now Secretary of the William Cobbett Society and took part in the 1997 Meridian television programme on *Rural Rides*. She is at present helping to edit Anne Cobbett's account of her life which the William Cobbett Society is publishing.

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